

A walk with Mr O (36)

Again, and again

Mr O, may I ask you a question about your prayer life?

In His Sermon on the Mount our Lord talks about private prayer as something secret. We are to shut the door on other people's presence, eyes and ears.

No one else is to know exactly what goes on when we are alone with God. Each Christian's prayer life is both unique and sacred. It is a personally tailored spiritual experience of which we are to say very little.

Yes, Mr O, but I need help! And doesn't the apostle Paul tell the Ephesians and Philippians what he has been privately praying for them?

Yes, that's because in private prayer we sometimes receive promptings. The Lord Himself constrains us to say certain things to particular people. This is not because they have asked us to. It is because a divinely-given weight in our spirit compels us to open up in that way.

So, I can't ask my question then?

If it's a general question about prayer, of course you can ask it! But you can't ask me or anyone else to disclose what goes on in our secret walk with God.

It's just that I've been a Christian quite a time now, but when I'm alone with the Lord I find that I feel compelled to pray the same thing again and again. I need to know whether this is normal or whether it's something that I should worry about.

To answer that I will need to ask you a few questions of my own! Is it possible that you've fallen into the sin of 'vain repetitions', as our Lord calls them? Those who don't know the Lord's ways think that if they ask Him for something often enough, they can bend Him to their will. Their persistence is self-centred.

No, Mr O, I don't think that's the case. It's true that I want something for myself. In fact, I want it very badly. I ask for it again and again. But I do it because I believe that if He gave that to me, it would bring Him both glory and pleasure.

And that's the difference between 'vain repetitions' (which are sinful) and 'importunity' (which our Lord frequently commends). In my view, there are not really many believers who understand the difference.

It's a difference which is perfectly illustrated by Elijah's contest with the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. The Baalites' repetitions were a noisy, selfish affair, and it was all in vain. Elijah's importunity was quiet, full of faith, assured and God-centred. And his importunity in then praying for rain seems to have been done in silence.

Thank you. That's really helpful. So, like me, do you find yourself praying for the same thing again and again? Oh, sorry, I'm not sure whether I should have asked such a personal question!

In addition to importunity, praying and praying for the same thing is a Christian duty. That's why we have been given the Lord's Prayer. It's not a prayer to be recited, at least not very often. It's a template to guide us in our daily prayers. Jesus expects each one of us to use it every day.

Not only so, but there is no individual Christian who can pray for everything and everyone that needs praying about. So, by His Spirit, the Lord secretly places on our hearts different burdens. Some are moved to pray for China. Others have no burden for China, but feel compelled to pray for French-speaking Africa.

British Christians pray for the British government, while Russian Christians pray for those in authority in Moscow. I pray for all of my family and you pray for all of yours. And so, as I said earlier, each believer's prayer life is unique.

So, can I push you to the limit; is there anything personal that you have prayed for again and again?

I will tell you this and no more. From my teenage years until now I have frequently prayed a prayer of Amy Carmichael which begins like this:

Love of God, Eternal Love, pour Thy Love through me.
Nothing less than Calvary love do I ask of Thee:
Fill me, flood me, overflow me,
Love of God, Eternal Love, pour Thy Love through me.